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Queer-Alt-Delete: Glitch Art as Protest Against the Surveillance Cis-tem

Andie Shabbar

Abstract: This paper locates glitch art as a critical and creative mode of protest against sexual surveillance. With reference to my art project *Queer-Alt-Delete*, and by drawing on the affirmative philosophies of Rosi Braidotti and Gilles Deleuze, I argue that glitch art interlaces algorithmic uncertainty with subjectivity in ways that facilitate an experimentation with new political becomings. I question the characterization of biometrics as a foreboding and impenetrable cloud of networked computational control and suggest that glitch art has the capacity to expose and exploit the inherent vulnerabilities and fallibility of recognition technologies. Making a case for a consideration of the virtual dimensions of protest, I emphasize the unexpected and indeterminate potentials of glitch art to corrupt binary cis-tems of surveillance. **Keywords:** surveillance, glitch, sexuality, queer, digital art, biometrics, Deleuze

System glitches are often met with frustration and annoyance. The machine takes control by momentarily arresting user activity. Hands clench together, sounds of exasperation escape from lips, eyes roll back, sensations well up in the body as we try to maintain composure in the moment of an unexpected disruption inflicted by computational error. To exit a frozen system, to escape a wonky program, or to reboot and reset we use the keyboard command “control-alt-delete.” Pressing down the keys, we aim to interrupt the interruption imposed on us. We command the machine to quit glitching. Imagining a different relationship between glitch and body, user and computer, error and potential, this paper locates glitch as a site of protest against contemporary technologies and practices of sexual



Fig 1. Andie Shabbar, *Glitch 1* from *Queer-Alt-Delete*. 2018.

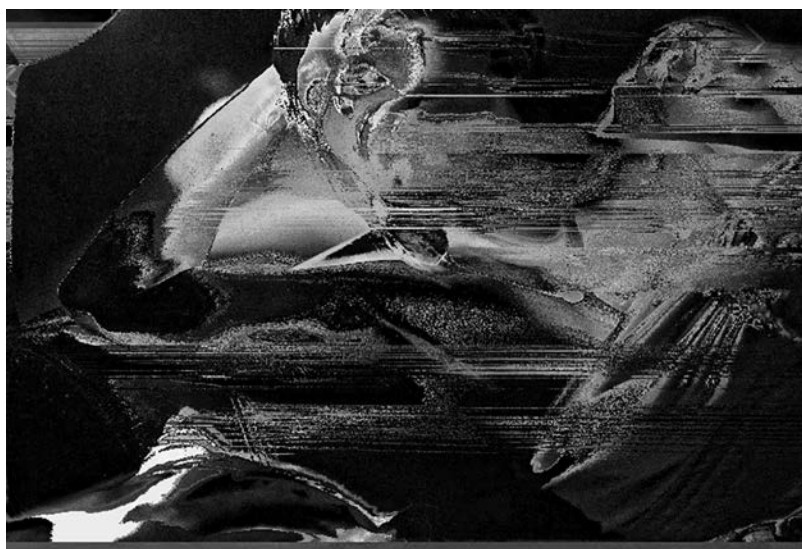


Fig 2. Andie Shabbar, *Glitch 2* from *Queer-Alt-Delete*. 2018.

surveillance. According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the term “glitch” is derived from the Yiddish word *glitsch*, which means “to slip” and the etymology of protest is “to put forth in public” or “to testify or witness.” As a form of protest then, glitch witnesses and testifies to the slippages, cracks, and fissures of control, surveillance, and technology to reformat error as an act of resistance.

With reference to my art project *Queer-Alt-Delete*, this paper argues that glitch *art* interlaces algorithmic uncertainty with subjectivity in ways that facilitate an experimentation with new political becomings. Glitch art is defined as the practice of manipulating media in ways that produce unexpected images or sounds. This may include data manipulation, corrupting algorithmic code, or using hardware in unintended ways to introduce an element of error into the art-making process. The resulting artwork varies greatly depending on the file’s format and the technique used. Regardless of how the data is manipulated, the image that is visually rendered cannot be predetermined. This is because glitch artists work with a canvas of code. As such, they do not seek to make images appear, but rather they distort code to make recognizable forms *disappear*. Glitch art exploits the instability of technology and harnesses failure as a creative tool to corrupt the familiar. The political potential of glitch art is twofold: it exposes the fallibility of digital technologies and it exploits their weakness to produce uncertain and indeterminate effects that render new ways of engaging with our digital-physical selves.

Likewise, the premise of *Queer-Alt-Delete* is not to create a final glitch aesthetic but to marshal error as a form of productive uncertainty. To create the images, I use the technique of “databending.” Databending, also known as datamoshing or glitching, is the practice of damaging digital image files by (re)moving, adding, and duplicating the file’s code to corrupt images. To do this, I convert a digital image file into a text document by changing the extension from .jpg to .txt. Then, I glitch the code by deleting or adding new data. After bending the file, I save it back into an image format, rendering a visual glitch. The process is easy and does not require special software or technology other than a computer, digital images, and a text editor. It does, however, require patience; depending on the size of the image file, glitching the code can be a tedious process. There is no guarantee that the file will even open and be viewable given that it is easy to corrupt the image’s code to the point of total destruction.

From Control-Alt-Delete to *Queer-Alt-Delete*

Queer-Alt-Delete eliminates “control” from the operation of escape and quits or exits the surveillance cis-tem by inserting “queer” in its place. That is, for each still photo, I corrupt the image file by typing “queer” into the dataset several times. Crucially, I insert “queer” not to insert an identity marker into the code but to *bend* its limitations. I do this as a response to biometric recognition technologies that aim to fix the body within rigid identity categories. For example, full-body X-ray scanners in airports flag inorganic parts of the body as potential weapons and therefore single out gender prosthetics as suspicious anomalies, and security scanners that only show a generic outline of the body reduce bodies to either female or male to identify a traveler’s gender before they are cleared by security personnel (Fischer 2016, 193).¹ Both technologies mark trans bodies as biometric failures, sanctioning additional scrutiny and surveillance of travelers who do not cohere to gender norms.

Although my project is situated in the context of sexual surveillance, it is important to note that the biometrically identifiable subject—the body that is easily recognized by surveillance technologies and therefore does

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Fig 3. Andie Shabbar, screen capture of *databending* from *Queer-Alt-Delete*. 2018.

not pose a potential “security threat”—is not only one who is cisgender but also white and able-bodied (Magnet 2011, 24). Indeed, the gender binary itself is a racialized and ablest norm in which the categories of “woman” and “man” are constituted by white, able-bodied legibility.² For example, in the context of surveillance and the securitization of bodies at the airport, the hijab, disability aids, and black women’s hair are often treated as suspect given that they exceed norms of white femininity (Browne 2015, 133; Magnet 2011, 31). This “excess” disrupts the racialized boundaries of femininity constituting the gender binary. In other words, the additional scrutinization and search of black, brown, and disabled bodies is imbricated in the dizzying logic of gender excess whereby anything that exists outside of white, cisgender, able-bodied masculinity/femininity marks a body as untrustworthy and a threat to national security. As Shoshana Magnet asserts, racist and sexist notions of the body are encoded in surveillance practices and technologies in ways that “produce some bodies as belonging to the nation-state while excluding others. . . . Thus when biometrics fail to work, they are successful in other ways” (2011, 12). Which is to say that the failure of black and brown bodies to be recognized as trusted travelers works in hand with white appearance norms that successfully uphold the gender binary.

For this reason, biometric failure is *not* a glitch. It does not frustrate the regular flow of racialized and gendered surveillance and securitization; rather, it enhances the biopolitical governance of certain bodies over others. The failure to recognize certain bodies is encoded into technology as a sure thing. As Simone Browne contends in her incisive study on the surveillance of blackness, “[biometric] technology privileges whiteness, or at least lightness, in its use of lighting and in the ways in which certain bodies are lit and measured in the enrollment process” (2015, 113). She attributes this to the practice of “prototypical whiteness,” in which white skin and facial features serve as prototypes for the development and design of recognition technology. Prototypical whiteness inscribes racialized schemas in surveillance technology that result in an increase of biometric failure for people of color. Thus, thinking of recognition failure as an “error” erases and excuses the racist, ablest, and transphobic schemas encoded during the design and development process of biometric technologies and suggests that they are merely an accident.

Glitch as Protest

Queer-Alt-Delete works against biometric failure. It plays with error to unsettle the computational categorization of bodies and protest binary forms of control. I create intentional errors to produce unintentional results that make portraits unrecognizable to facial recognition technology. However, the political importance of the project is not found in the images it renders but the potentials it creates. Like gender-bending, databending has the capacity to disrupt rigid cis-stems through unexpected nonbinary performances that queer the (gender) code. To be clear, although glitch art may be harnessed as a practical intervention to the quotidian flow of digital surveillance—which is to say that glitch images can be used to subvert facial recognition technology—my focus in the remainder of this paper is on the *virtual* dimensions of glitch and the protest potentials it activates.

Following political philosopher Gilles Deleuze, I conceptualize the virtual as the imperceptible dimension of reality that we cannot perceive but contains potentials for new realities to emerge. The virtual is made up of energies, affects, and intensities; it is something we can only intuit. Once its potentials are felt they become actual tangible objects that can be located in space and time. Importantly, the virtual does not exist prior to the actual nor does the actual “realize” potentials from the virtual (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 148). The actual and virtual coincide, acting and reacting to each other—they are two different but interacting dimensions of reality. *Queer-Alt-Delete* is an art project that zigzags between the virtual and actual: it creates actual disruptions to surveillance technology in order to release virtual potentials that engender new modes of protest.

In the same way, the point of a protest is to unleash virtual potentials that effectuate political transformation and social change. Although a protest takes issue with a particular oppressive force, such as sexual surveillance, its outcome cannot be fully determined in advance nor does it necessarily seek an immediate response. Protest is an uncertain, contingent, and indeterminate event fuelled by the affective intensities of frustration, anger, vulnerability, and hope that engender embodied participation. In part, I am arguing that the success of a protest cannot be measured or quantified in terms of how many bodies were involved or how much visibility and media attention it received or where it took place. The success of a protest is determined by the potentials it generates and the waves of desire it produces for radical social renewal. *Queer-Alt-Delete*, and glitch art

more broadly, is not just a reactionary tool of resistance; it works productively in the same virtual register as protest. It circuits both the virtual and the actual by stirring up new relations between bodies and code, humans and machines, subjects and surveillance, protest and art. *Queer-Alt-Delete* emits and absorbs new relations between actual objects to produce virtual potentials of resistance to the controlling forces of surveillance.

My exploration of the abstract aspects of protest and glitch art is a response to the abstract operations of sexual surveillance. By “abstract” I do not mean the opacity of data networks, but rather the intangible virtual intensities produced by surveillance technology. Nonetheless, there is a palatable cultural anxiety surrounding the obscure workings of biometrics and a growing fear that emergent data technologies, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic processing will be turned against the public and used as mechanisms of state control. While informational data capture presents real social dangers that warrant serious attention, the overwhelming characterization of biometrics as a foreboding and impenetrable cloud of networked computational control obscures its vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Moreover, the effort to characterize data surveillance as a neutral participatory practice, in which the public openly consents to information collection for consumer conveniences and monetary gain, neglects the ways in which structural oppression, including racial profiling and gender policing, are deeply woven into practices of data collection. What I am suggesting is that an analysis of surveillance that is concerned with consumer participation as self-subjugation sidelines the ways in which marginalized people are disproportionately targeted for data collection (Magnet 2011).

Similarly, perspectives on surveillance that focus on the supposed “levelling of hierarchies” (Haggerty and Erickson 2006), or those preoccupied with celebrating the so-called autonomy of artificial technology, risk ignoring the structural forms of control that are embedded in data collection and biometric surveillance practices. Which is not to say that complex mechanisms of computational control do not exist or do not require scholarly attention, indeed these avenues of inquiry have offered interesting and new ways to consider the relationship between gender and surveillance (Galloway 2012). However, I argue that protest of sexual surveillance needs to contend with both the rhizomatic and hierarchical subsystems of surveillance to confront and transform the ways in which digital surveillance technology is both produced by and productive of systemic forms of oppression. Said another way, a critical investigation into sexual

surveillance needs to locate the points at which social politics, identity, and the material body intersect with code. As Benjamin Haber poignantly writes, “If location alone can productively serve as a proxy for characteristics like race and class, imagine both the power and the erasure that can occur in combining location with purchasing data and social media information—blackness can be policed, managed, and jailed without ever calling it race” (2016, 155). Thus, my attention here to “top-down” systems of control aims to acknowledge the nuanced ways in which racism, homophobia, and sexism intertwine with data collection

Queer-Alt-Delete is a feminist engagement with digital surveillance that begins from a politics of location. The project performs protest of surveillance by glitching images of the self in order to question one’s attachment to identity. In doing so, it asks the artist or creator to both acknowledge and illustrate their socially situated, embedded, and embodied context in



Fig 4. Andie Shabbar, *Glitch 3* from *Queer-Alt-Delete*. 2018.

relation to sexual surveillance. Indeed, the project was prompted by my experience as a white and Pakistani mixed-race, queer woman. Although I pass as white daily, my Muslim last name engenders unexpected moments of surveillance that often result in the extra securitization of my body at security checkpoints and in various public spaces. An approach to surveillance that considers these politics of location does not foreclose an investigation into its abstract, horizontal, and virtual dimensions. This is because surveillance is an assemblage of technologies, practices, systems, and relations. Surveillance functions through techniques that are *both* horizontal and hierarchal, digital and analogue, visible and invisible, targeted and generalized, insidious and obvious, computational and affective, practical and abstract.

Glitching the Surveillance Assemblage

According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, an assemblage is a multiplicity of discrete elements that do not converge or lose their heterogeneity but instead come together through relation to perform a particular function. An assemblage operates through the relation *between* its composing elements (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 4). Conceptualizing surveillance as an assemblage enables us to consider it both as an overarching mechanism of control *and* as a series of specific relations of inequality. My concern is with the relation between elements within a given assemblage, such as the relation between the elements of code and sexuality. Keeping an eye on both the macro and micro workings of biometric surveillance allows us to ask: How are certain bodies put into relation within a given surveillance assemblage? What does the relation between different elements do? And, how can we disrupt oppressive relations and their subsequent effects?

Building on Deleuze and Guattari, Jasbir K. Puar turns to the concept of assemblage to advocate for a new theoretical “roadmap” to chart the intertwining ways in which discursive formations of identity and the material relations of bodies affect the experience and expression of subjectivity. She writes that a feminist perspective of identity as an assemblage “de-privilege[s] the human body as a discrete organic thing. . . . The body does not end at the skin. We leave traces of our DNA everywhere we go, we live with other bodies within us, microbes and bacteria, we are enmeshed in forces, affects, energies, we are composites of information” (2012, 57). The cartography of subjectivity that Puar puts forward together with an

understanding of surveillance as an assemblage that functions through several channels all at once—including the practical and abstract, hierarchical and horizontal, discursive and material, structural and datalogical—provides a useful starting point to examine specific instances of sexual surveillance and its correlative malfunctions. Patricia Clough and her collaborators define the “datalogical turn” as a shift in sociological methods that propagate obscure algorithmic processing and nonrepresentational logics to intensify social affects (2015). An interrogation of the datalogical turn gestures toward the ubiquitous relations of power and control not normally seen, as well as those that are often circuitously hidden from view. Although not explicitly explored here, it is worth considering the ways in which biometric sexual surveillance participates in datalogics and how glitch may be used as a strategy to confront the turn.

Queer-Alt-Delete is a mode of protest that understands identity as a composite of information operating within a surveillance assemblage. When a rigid relation between two elements fails within the surveillance assemblage—such as the relation between binary code and gender—a glitch is produced. To restate, glitch is not synonymous with *biometric* failure, instead *cis-tem* failures engender the potential for a glitch to occur. Glitches reveal the constraint of identity while short-circuiting it. Brian Massumi introduces the grid of identification as an over coded organization of the body that plots the body into various identity categories. The grid creates “a system of value judgment” in which “some bodies are what they are and are good; others are not what they seem to be and are bad” (1992, 76, 110). He explains that bodies are positioned on the grid by inhabiting one side of each category: either female or male, gay or straight, transgender or cisgender, nonwhite or white. Though categories overlap and a body can be positioned in several places on the grid at once, every position is predetermined. Biometric failure does not dismantle the grid, it activates it. For the trans traveler flagged by the security scanner, the body is held up, delayed, detained by systems of categorization that seek to securitize identity on the grid by “securitizing gender” (Currah and Mulqueen 2011). When the security scanner is unable to recognize gender, there is a concerted effort to locate, position, quantify, code, and decode the body, an effort that activates the grid while at the same time exposes its inherent instability—biometric failure reveals the potential for the grid of identification to be *glitched*. I am not suggesting that biometric failure should be harnessed as a form of protest. Such a claim ignores the ways



Fig 5. Andie Shabbar, *Glitch 4* from *Queer-Alt-Delete*. 2018.



Fig 6. Andie Shabbar, *Glitch 5* from *Queer-Alt-Delete*. 2018.

in which biometric failure exists as a dangerous reality for certain bodies. Nor am I suggesting that glitch images themselves, as static objects, enact a protest. I suggest that virtual potentials for resistance arise in the *act* of glitching. Glitch is a protest that touches the virtual and that may or may not be effectuated in the moment of biometric uncertainty.

Mobilizing Deleuze's concept of the virtual, Betti Marenko proposes a useful conceptual shift from conceiving of glitch as an accident to understanding glitch as an event. She determines the "glitch-event" as a "mutual modulation and differentiation of analogue and digital" that renders new virtual relations between body and code (2015, 111). Given that the glitch-event incorporates the analogue, Marenko argues that glitch "can be apprehended via material intuition as data-rich divinations of possible futures beyond cognition and control" (111). In other words, glitch gestures toward a future of potentials that not only incorporate relations between code and bodies but also produce new ones as well. She further claims that "glitch is a procedural stutter whose broken utterance speaks of other, entirely non-human worlds, revealing a machinic agency grounded in the pervasive march of algorithm-driven thought" (112). While I share Markeno's sense of enchantment and the utopian feelings that glitch conjures up, I am weary of her insistence that the political importance of glitch rests "in breaking the spell of the interface, in shattering its black mirror [to] discloses aspects of machine operationality (and disarray) not normally witnessed or contemplated" (112). These aspects, she claims, are the "autonomous capacity of digital matter" (112). If glitch is imagined as an event that pulls back the curtain to reveal computational surveillance, its importance is not that it exposes the mysterious and "autonomous" inner workings of data, but that it illuminates that a curtain was in fact hung. Thus, while Markeno explores the potentials of glitch as a "divination" of digital matter that expose the lack of computational predictability, I am more interested in asking how glitch creates a new interface between bodies and technology. Instead of asking what glitch *reveals*, I think a more productive question to ask and one that I have been addressing thus far is *What does glitch do?*

Potentia and Becoming

Queer-Alt-Delete stages an interaction between the human and the non-human material forces of technology in ways that increase the subject's

potentia. Rosi Braidotti defines *potentia* as “the positivity of the intensive subject—its joyful affirmation . . . the capacity to express his/her freedom . . . the preindividual or impersonal power; the affirmation of multiplicity and not of one-sidedness and the interconnection with an ‘outside’ which is of cosmic dimension and infinite” (2006, 134, 147). *Queer-Alt-Delete* increases *potentia* by unfolding and realizing a desire to become otherwise. *Queer-Alt-Delete* remixes the self’s relation to digital renderings of identity in ways that affirm the positive aspects of categorical instability. The project glitches gender by (re)moving, adding, and duplicating information in ways that affirm the self as an always-becoming multiplicity. Although the project was produced as an individual art practice, by rendering the face imperceptible and decentering the self through a refusal to represent identity, I propose glitch art as a potential act of resistance that enables collective solidarity through artistic anonymity. My goal is to introduce new ways of thinking about protest and resistance rather than proscribing glitch as a general tool of activism. As I envision it, glitch art may *spark* a desire to separate the notion of an individual identity from a political subjectivity whereby protest is done not in the interest of the self but in the interest of the many.

Queer-Alt-Delete is a gesture toward a politics of becoming-imperceptible. Not to be confused with disappearance or escape, imperceptibility can be understood, here, as a disorganized, indeterminate, and undetectable event or act of infiltration of that which oppresses us. In other words, becoming-imperceptible crosses the boundaries between the human and nonhuman and stretches our potential to act in the world. Becoming-imperceptible, in Braidotti’s formulation, is an “ethico-political project” that sustains the subject’s *potentia* through interactions between human and environmental forces. In her words, becoming-imperceptible is “the point of evanescence of the self and its replacement by a living nexus of multiple interconnections that empower not the self, but the collective; not identity, but affirmative subjectivity; not consciousness, but affirmative interconnections” (Braidotti 2006, 154). In this sense, becoming-imperceptible is a way of disappearing insofar as it dissolves a recognizable identity in favor of collective autonomy. *Queer-Alt-Delete* dismantles the individual face to join the faceless many. It is a mode of becoming-imperceptible because it stretches the boundaries of recognition and representation by engaging in a creative process of transformation that is not wholly enacted through human intentionality. In

this sense, glitching portraits is a practice of what Braidotti calls “nomadic ethics,” which she describes as an ethical project of “experiment[ing] with different modes of constituting subjectivity and different ways of inhabiting our corporeality” (2006, 134). *Queer-Alt-Delete* fuses the unknown and unpredictable with the desire to become unidentifiable and succeeds at subverting surveillance through its representational failure.

Queer-Alt-Delete is a project that brings to the fore what surveillance technologies aim to obscure: that their processes are always unstable and open to queer corruption. The project occupies the territory of error that currently works against queer subjects and reimagines glitch as a form of protest, as subversion and movement within a rigid structure, as randomness and autonomy. In other words, glitch incites a random relation between the body, disidentification, and data to set free the virtual potentials to become otherwise. The subversive potential of *Queer-Alt-Delete* lies in destroying the code so that images are rendered into visibility in unplanned and unscripted ways, enabling us to access our digital selves and experiment with subjectivity through code. It performs the abstract function of queering code to escape the concrete cis-tem of surveillance. As an act of protest, *Queer-Alt-Delete* glitches digital surveillance technology by disrupting algorithms of control and experiments with new ways of dismantling the cis-tem.

Andie Shabbar is a PhD candidate and lecturer in the Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research at the University of Western Ontario, where she also teaches courses in the faculty of information and media studies. She can be reached at ashabba@uwo.ca.

Notes

1. Although backscatter X-ray scanners were removed from U.S. airports in 2013 due to public concerns over privacy, current “security scanners” that use millimeter waves continue to use an algorithm that is only capable of classifying bodies as either male or female. Before a traveler enters the body scanner, the security agent must select either a pink button for female or a blue button for male. The button that is selected by the agent is not based on the gender listed on the traveler's passport, but is based on the agent's *subjective perception* of a person's gender. The United States Transportation Security Administration (TSA) website explains, “When you enter the imaging portal, the TSA officer presses a button designating a gender (male/female)

based on how you present yourself. The machine has software that looks at the anatomy of men and women differently. . . . If a pat-down is performed, it will be conducted by an officer of the same gender as you present yourself.” To avoid biometric failure and increased surveillance, trans travelers must either conform with a gender normative self-presentation or notify the agent that they identify as transgender ahead of time. Otherwise, they risk being marked as a potential security threat.

2. See Ellison et al. 2017 for an instructive discussion on the complex relationship between blackness and transness including the ways in which the gender binary is always already racialized.

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